

AN ITALIAN STUDENT AND SOLDIER



*** SOTTO-TENENTE MICHELE GRIECO**

64th Reg't Infantry, Italian Army

BORN SEPTEMBER 27, 1890, TERLIZZI, PROVINCE OF BARI, ITALY

DIED APRIL 22, 1918, WITH THE ITALIAN ARMY, MACEDONIA

* Sub-Lieutenant — 2nd Lieutenant



By
MRS. FRANCES H. ELDREDGE

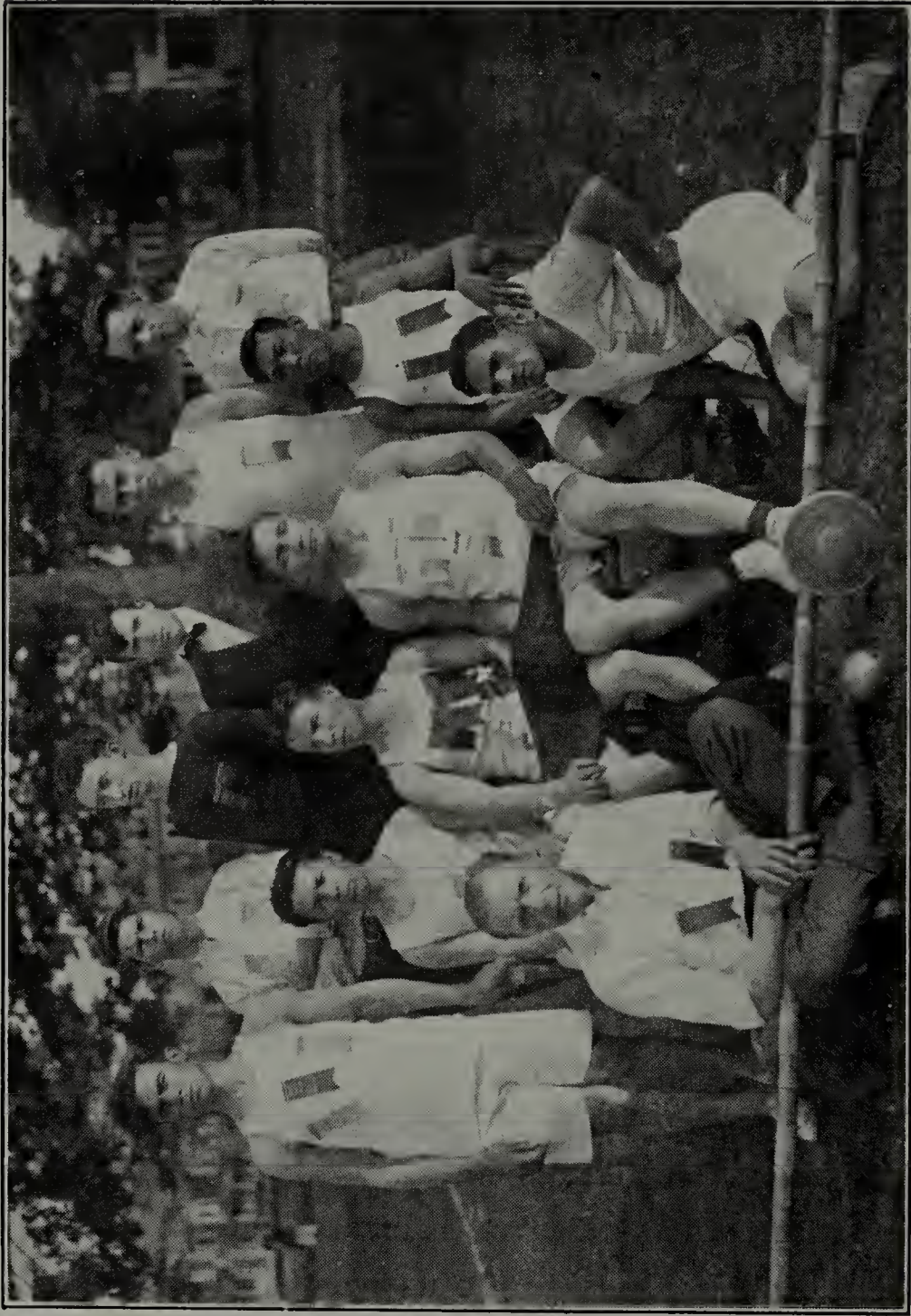
AN ITALIAN STUDENT AND SOLDIER.

THE American International College, Springfield, Mass., furnished its full quota for service in the Great War. The majority were enrolled under the stars and stripes but there were soldiers in the English, French, Italian, Greek and Polish armies. There were also men and women under the Red Cross and Y. M. C. A. and in important home service impossible for people of one language and for those without understanding of other nationalities than their own.

Only one was called to make the supreme sacrifice. This sketch of a few years of his short life bears witness to the development of mind and character under the influence of mission and school, and may help to answer the question, "Are these worth while?"

In 1909, two young men, Michele Grieco and Carlo Iorio, were employed as workmen in the building of an aqueduct in Southern Italy. Their casual acquaintance quickly developed into a friendship which was to increase in intimacy in the coming years. The question before them, as before many others of their age, was military service or emigration. Iorio decided first and came to Pittsfield, Massachusetts, in March, 1910, where Grieco joined him in July of the same year.

They were both anxious to learn English and became members of an evening class for Italians conducted by Paolo S. Abbate, a former student in the American International College, then in charge of St. Paul's Mission. This acquaintance led them to the religious services of the mission. On Easter Sunday, 1911, they took their stand as Christians and became members of the First Congregational Church of Pittsfield. Mr. Abbate speaks of them as earnest, faithful workers.



ATHLETIC WINNERS A. I. C. FIELD DAY, 1915

Lieut. Grieco at lower right hand corner

Because of their eagerness to advance, Mr. Abbate advised and encouraged them to go to school. Meanwhile, they were living and working together, saving every cent possible, economizing even in bread, for in those years work was scarce. There was not money enough for both to start in the autumn of 1911, so Grieco encouraged his friend to enter the introductory department of the American International College, promising to help in the expenses of that year and to enter, himself, in 1912. So he literally dug his way into his school life in Springfield.

The two friends were together there until the spring of 1916. Carlo Iorio graduated from the academy that year, spent a year at Amherst Agricultural College and began his sophomore year. However, he volunteered in November, 1917, was in a replacement regiment of engineers and was transferred to an officers' training school shortly before the Armistice. He has returned to college, has worked hard to support himself and to make up deficiencies.

As Michele Grieco continued his course in introductory studies and in the academy, no one would have selected the quiet unpretending Italian with few previous educational advantages as the future idealistic patriot and brave, resourceful soldier. Those who learned to know him well, however, can see that the elements of both were there. He was not a brilliant student, but he went steadily forward in his own chosen ways.

His teacher in college preparatory English recalls his absorbed silence, while others talked freely about the subject matter of the lesson, and then the raising of his head, his winsome smile, some short remarks, original and to the point, always worth while. He read much in English and Italian, became more familiar with European history from an Italian standpoint than any of his compatriots in school, intelligently and fervently tracing out the fulfillment of laws of cause and effect.

While he worked, thought and reasoned as a man, he played with boys as a boy in such a way that he was often classed with those younger than himself. He had a few close friends to whom he was unselfishly loyal, but such a spirit of comradeship that no appeal to his sympathy was easily turned aside, even though his self-interest was thus often endangered. He quickly resented what he deemed injustice or dishonor and was ready to champion the injured as generous impulse dictated.

He remained in the institution nearly four years, working for his own maintenance, quietly gaining in knowledge and experience but never assuming leadership. In the Spring of 1916 his slowly formed purpose matured. He decided to give up his cherished plans and to return to Italy to enter military service. With few words he made preparations and was in New York City, ready to sail April 21. He was among the Italian soldiers who entered Monastir in November, 1916, of which he wrote a graphic account a few months later. He was made "caporale" in January, 1917, and had two narrow escapes from death, as he undertook dangerous messenger service. He also was in fierce fighting at the front.

In April, 1917, he wrote again from Italy where he served in another regiment in the Alpine region, in what he called "Italia Redenta." He had taken a short officers' course, successfully passed examinations, had a brief furlough, during which he sought out the mother of a much loved American International schoolmate who died in New York in 1916, returned to his own regiment in Macedonia, as "aspirante ufficiale" and was placed in command of fifty men. In November, for a special act of bravery, his name was proposed as "Sotto Tenente." April 19, while instructing his men behind the trenches he was fatally wounded by the bursting of a hand grenade with a falsified fuse, died in the hospital April 22, and was given a military funeral the following day.

A survey of the letters written during his last two years shows that most of their space was given to intelligent consideration of political and military conditions both in Europe and in America. No matter where he was or how hard he was working, he must have made every effort possible to keep in touch with current events. His letters show wide, careful reading on these lines and his allusions to historic events, statesmen, and soldiers and to the English literature he studied in his academic course, show that his mind was continually working out consequences and comparisons. So, in turn, Mexican problems and diplomatic correspondence in America are commented upon as well as movements in belligerent countries. He welcomed America's entrance into the war and followed her progress, comparing her internal troubles with those of Italy. He analyzed the motives for the invasion of Italy in 1917, and was proud of the final resistance of the Italians, prophesying their future unity and strength.

The following extracts from his letters, however, are chosen to reveal his personality, his patriotism and his recognition of what America had done for him. He seldom referred to personal hardships and then only incidentally as a matter of course. All his letters express thoughtful affection for friends and teachers and appreciative loyalty to the American International College.

Of his first day in Italy, in Genoa, May, 1916, he writes:

"Let me tell you that what I liked best was the beautiful cemetery of Staglieno. I went to see the tomb of that great Italian martyr, Joseph Mazzini. It seemed that all the trees and stones and the ground itself were shouting, 'Take off your hat and kneel down, for you are before the remains of a great man.' "

At Teano, August, 1916, waiting for orders, he writes: "I admire your land of liberty, as well as your principles of democracy, your humanitarian spirit and your customs, and I shall

never forget that in America I have passed the best days of my life. Very soon I shall be called to pay the tribute due by every good Italian to Italy. If I lose my life or if I ruin my future, I shall never be sorry while I do my duty for the land which God chose for my native home."

Later in 1916, in Macedonia between Lake Doiran and Lake Doranbuk; in front of a high mountain on which the Bulgarians are encamped, he writes: "Often in the quietness of the night, observing the beautiful Macedonian sky full of stars which send down to us their feeble light, I dream of you, of America, of the A. I. C., of all the good teachers I have known, of the so many friends; and such dreams stupify me till, facing the bright sky I begin to sleep. Things come and go; others come and go; and then others and others also will come and go; but a sublime vision or a bad one will be left in the human mind and that vision appears always in time of happiness or in time of sorrow to relate the old happening."

In February, 1917, in Macedonia, he wrote again:

"When peace comes I will find where peace lives and there I shall live. But it does not mean I am sorry, for I cannot be sorry, understanding why I am fighting. It snows and snows and we are under tents. Pray for me and for all those who are fighting from both sides." His last letter was written April 18, 1918, the day before he received his fatal wounds. He says:

"If I had been an American citizen, I would have fought, if need be, not only against an ally of Italy but against Italy herself. But being a true Italian I did not take American citizenship. * * * If Italy were not in the war and the United States had been in the same condition as today, I should have been fighting for America as I am fighting for Italy."

With the news of his death was sent a letter written at Teano August, 1916, which was left with his sister to be forwarded.

He says:

“Let me tell you that I go to war, glad to do my duty for the future of Italy and for the future freedom of Europe. I got this spirit from the free and democratic United States of America. I hate war, but I hate more the autocratic systems of Austria, Turkey and Germany, and I am sure that the freedom of Europe would be lost if nations like these should succeed in the greatest struggle the world has ever seen. May God free the world with all humanity from any other conflict of this kind. May God inspire humankind with those principles more common in the United States, and then only can we have a perpetual peace and the triumph of the Prince of Peace. I believe that Italy has done the best duty for Europe and for herself, and that the entrance of Italy into the war has signalled the fall of the Central Empire. That is why I gladly go to war, for there is a great ideal.”

His ideal never left him. The gold star on the service flag of the American International College does not stand for a broken life but for noble service enlarged and completed.

* * *

He has not been forgotten. The one gold star on the flag hanging in the chapel has been a silent but not unheeded testimonial to his patriotism. His comrades have written and spoken of their love for him, their appreciation of his qualities of heart and mind. A Michele Grieco scholarship fund, slowly built up by small contributions from former students and from friends, will be in use in the coming year. It yields only a small sum annually, but it is hoped that selection as a recipient will be deemed an honor exceeding in value pecuniary assistance.

There are young men to follow in his footsteps, we believe, to whom a call for service wherever it is needed will not be made in vain.

Meanwhile we may say of him and of others to whom “The New Death” was apportioned:

“They shall not grow old as we that remain grow old. Age shall not weary them, nor the years condemn; at the going down of the sun and in the morning we shall remember them.”



THE CONGREGATIONAL HOME MISSIONARY SOCIETY
287 FOURTH AVENUE, NEW YORK